[Supplement to "The Groom Lake Desert Rat," Sept. 3, 1994.]

TITLE: SPECTATORS GATHER AROUND FOR PEEK AT SECRET AIR BASE

SUBTITLE: 'Groomstock' takes place to protest the Air Force's larger restriction zone keeping folks away.

PUBLICATION: Las Vegas Review-Journal

DATE: Aug. 29, 1994

AUTHOR: Susan Greene

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More than 60 campers gathered on a Lincoln County mountaintop this past weekend for a typical tent-fumbling, fire building, weenie roasting kind of campout.

Except for a few minor details.

Like the view 12 miles to the west of a secret air base that doesn't officially exist. And the camouflaged security police monitoring the group from nearby ridges with high-tech telescopes and night vision cameras. There were also signs, just 1,000 feet from the campsite, warning "use of deadly force authorized" should one of the campers have accidentally wandered across the base's border while searching for some firewood.

Faced with such obstacles, where else but on a ridge overlooking the military's secret Groom Lake, Area 51, or "Dreamland" testing facility would aviation buffs, government watchdogs, alien abductees, conspiracy theorists, filmmakers, reporters, marijuana-smoking slackers, card-carrying anarchists, socialists and libertarians, a Lincoln County commissioner and a conch-blowing religious zealot and his second cousin so peacefully come together on a craggy peak for a weekend in the great outdoors?

"Only on Freedom Ridge," said Groom Lake gadfly Glenn Campbell of the public high ground he christened two years ago that offers the best vantage point of the secret base.

Campbell, the author of "The Area 51 Visitor's Guide" and publisher of "The Groom Lake Desert Rat" newsletter, organized the weekend-long "Groomstock" as a protest and last hurrah before the Air Force extends the base's restricted zone by 3972 acres to prevent gawkers like himself from stealing glimpses of its seven mile runway and haze of buildings and hangars.

Last September, Air Force officials filed to withdraw Freedom Ridge and nearby White Sides Mountain from public lands, citing a need to protect the safe and secure operation of the 3.5 million acre Nellis Air Force Range complex. The range includes the secret base, which the federal government has never acknowledged

exists.

A decision by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt on whether to lock up the additional land is at least six months away, Bureau of Land Management officials said Friday.

During this weekend's campout, opinions about the withdrawal varied as much as reasons that led campers to the mountain ridge in the first place.

A few who believe the military uses the secret base to hide alien spacecraft or conduct genetic tests on abducted children opposed the withdrawal on grounds that it would keep them from monitoring clandestine activities.

For most, however, viewing the base is less important than answering questions about it. Although Campbell and his minions have resigned themselves to the likelihood of the withdrawal, they question the government's need for absolute secrecy in this post Cold War era.

"If they would just act like responsible adults and fess up to what they're doing out there, that would satisfy most of the curiosity," said Tom Mahood, a civil engineer from Irvine, Calif. "The military doesn't have to treat civilians like we're the enemy, especially when it's our tax dollars paying for it."

Originally built in the early 1950's to test the Lockheed U-2, the Groom Lake base has been used to test high-altitude, high-speed spy planes and other military aircraft, including the F-117A Stealth fighter, according to aviation industry sources and witnesses who have observed the installation.

The base has sparked particular controversy this year, including two citizen action lawsuits filed earlier this month on behalf of workers who allegedly suffered from illegal and unregulated open-air burning of toxic materials. Also in three incidents since March, Lincoln County sheriff's deputies have detained news crews suspected of illegally filming the installation.

In snubs to base officials, the campers directed phony cameras at the base, organized a stadium-style wave for the military police observing them from opposite ridges and posted signs along the road to Freedom Ridge where guards placed covert road sensors.

Then, on Saturday evening, when the sun went down and their protests were over, the campers kicked back around the campfire to toast marshmallows, gab about "black world" spy planes and UFO abductions and gaze into the clear night sky, transfixed, searching for a glimpse of something, anything inexplicable.

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PHOTO CAPTIONS:

#1: A woman who did not want to be identified looks at the secret Groom Lake base through a telescope. The Air Force is extending the base's restricted zone to prevent gawkers from stealing glimpses of its 7-mile runway.

#2: Glenn Campbell's camper has a special sign that indicates his interest in the secret base. [Bumper sticker in photo says, "AREA 51 VISITORS PERMIT."] Camouflaged security police monitor the group from nearby.

#3: A sign warns visitors that the area is not open to the public.

#4: Glen Campbell aims his phony camera at the secret facility. Campbell, the publisher of "The Groom Lake Desert Rat" newsletter, organized the weekend-long "Groomstock."

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